

More Than a Feeling

by YappiChick

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Summary: She was in his mind, but that wasn't enough for Cortana.

Spoilers for Halo 4.

More Than a Feeling

Written for the 2012 Yuletide. There are references to the Nylund books. However, if canon seemingly conflicted with each other (yeah, I'm looking at you, end of Halo: Reach and Halo 4 prologue), I defaulted to the game's canon rather than the novels. Spoilers for Halo 4. Y'all have been warned.

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><p>1. "Personal Space is Not an Option"
(Takes place before the events of Halo: CE)

She was about to meet her Spartan.

Cortana activated her avatar as Halsey held out her chip. In front of her, Sierra-117 was sitting, looking up at the two of them. She took in his appearance as he listened to Doctor Halsey speak about the upgrades to his MJOLNIR armor.

When the doctor finished her explanation, she held Cortana's chip out towards him. "John, I'd like for you to meet Cortana. She has been assigned to work with you," Halsey said, glancing at the AI.

"_Assigned_?" Cortana muttered, giving the doctor an annoyed look.
"That's not how I remember the conversation."

Halsey pressed her lips together briefly, but didn't address Cortana's remark. "She will be working with your armor via your neural link. She is the computer specialist I spoke to you about earlier."

John stood up as he carefully took the chip from Doctor Halsey. He looked down at Cortana, but said nothing.

So, he wasn't a chatty Spartan? That was ok; Cortana was more than happy to speak for the both of them.

"It's nice to meet you, Master Chief," she said smoothly. To her surprise, part of her longed to extend an arm in his direction to give his hand a sturdy shake.

The reality of that was, of course, she had no ability to do such a thing, but there was a longing -an inherited response from Halsey, no doubt- to reach out and give the Spartan in front of her a handshake as part of her introduction.

Instead, she stood with her hands behind her back as she waited for his response.

"Likewise, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" she asked, amused. Her hand itched to move forward again, but this time, she moved it to her hip. "It's just Cortana, Chief."

"Cortana," he repeated.

"You're right, Doctor," she said, smirking, "He does take orders well."

2. "Lady Luck Has Left the Building"
>(Takes place during Halo: Reach)<p>

John was hurting.

Cortana monitored his progress as he moved throughout the Pillar of Autumn to the cryobay as per Keyes' orders. His steps were fifteen percent faster than they usually were; his blood pressure was dangerously high; his pulse was racing.

John was angry.

Although she hadn't known the Chief for long, she knew he longed to be out of the ship, fighting for the people he had been trained to protect.

John, the Spartan who had been raised to believe that nothing was impossible for him or his team to achieve, was helpless.

Cortana transferred her avatar to the plinth as he stepped into the cryobay. Her arms hung awkwardly at her side when he passed by the holotank with barely a glance in her direction. "Chief..." she started.

He paused briefly before changing his direction and walking to her position. He knelt down to be eye-level with her; his hand settled just inches from her feet. "Have you heard from the others?"

The others, the Spartans that had been ordered -by John- to help ground forces on Reach, had lost contact with the Autumn just

before John had completed his mission to destroy the data crystal chip on the Covenant vessel that had been orbiting Reach.

She shook her head, sliding down to sit down, legs crossed in front of her. She started to reach out her hand to place on his fingers before realizing such a gesture of friendship would probably not be welcomed by the stoic Chief.

Then, her subroutines unnecessarily reminded her that she was unable to touch anything, social awkwardness or no.

She frowned at her faux pas -and the answer she had for him. "No, I haven't." She crossed her arms. "I'm monitoring all communication bandwidths, but so far...nothing."

He was quiet for two full seconds before he moved to stand. Cortana mimicked his movements.

"I need to get into cryo," he said stiffly. "If you hear anything from them, wake me."

They both knew he was in no position to give her orders; she was under the command of Jacob Keyes, but she nodded. "I will, Chief."

"And Cortana..." He stopped and turned around. He shifted his head downward; Cortana swore he was looking at the hand that had reached out to touch him. "...thanks."

3. "Warning: Characters are More Human Than They Appear"
>(Takes place after the events of First Strike)<p>

He was exhausted.

The Gettysburg would be in the Sol system in less than sixteen hours. Cortana had insisted that John get a few hours of sleep, especially in light of his current condition.

After a feeble argument, and the encouragement of his fellow Spartans, John had conceded and promptly fell asleep in one of the crew quarters.

Cortana waited until John had entered into REM sleep to transfer to his quarters, not waiting the light of her avatar to wake him up. When her hologram activated, she was face to face with his helmet which had been sitting next to the holotank.

For several moments -eons to an AI like herself- she watched him sleep.

His eyes fluttered behind the lids; she wondered what he was dreaming. Based on the tension in his body, his subconscious thoughts weren't pleasant.

Was he thinking about Keyes? Or all of the others that had died on Reach?

A frown passed over her face as his eyes fluttered. It was strange for her to see his humanity; the soldier hid the man behind the visor well.

But, no matter how hard he tried to keep that side of him hidden, he wasn't a machine.

She turned and looked at the helmet that was next to her. Her reflection -warped and discolored- looked back at her. Without allowing her subroutines to remind her the pointlessness of the action, she reached out and gently placed her hand on the visor.

It went through the glass, as she expected it to.

But, for a brief moment, she could almost convince herself she felt something.

Perhaps, too, she thought wistfully, there was a person beneath the layers of protocols and code.

A stirring from the bed disrupted her thoughts. "Cortana, is everything alright?" His voice was rumbled more than normal, rough from sleep.

She snatched her hand back and straightened. "Everything's fine, Chief."

4. "Crash Landings are Just Part of the Job Now"
>(Takes place right before "Outskirts" in Halo 2)<p>

She knew she should be used to this by now.

John, while seeming to have an abundance of luck at times, was very unlucky when it came to crash landings. Inevitably, he would end up unconscious while Cortana frantically called his name, hoping that enemy forces wouldn't zero in on their position while she was in no position to protect them.

It wasn't his fault that the Scarab had managed to get a shot off, hitting the transport. But, she does wish that, for once, he would have just taken a seat. Maybe then he wouldn't have been thrown out of the back of the Pelican, landing in the middle of a war zone.

"Talk to me, should I start CPR? What's going on?" she said, hoping her voice would awaken him.

He didn't stir.

Not for the first time -and probably not the last either- she wished that she could manifest herself and shake the Chief awake. A simple nudge on the shoulder from an AI would certainly startle him out of his unconsciousness.

Or perhaps, the shock of his incorporeal companion being able to -finally- reach out and touch him would shock him back into oblivion.

Maybe not having the ability to touch him was a good thing, she told herself.

Then again, Cortana thought with a surprising sense of longing, maybe it wasn't such a good thing after all.

5. "I'm just doin' my job, ma'am"
>(Takes place during the "Cortana" end cutscene.)<p>

He had found her.

He had kept his promise.

He would protect her from the Gravemind.

"You know me, when I make a promise..." he rumbled.

For the first time since John had followed her order and left her with on High Charity, Cortana felt alive. She lifted her head and looked at John. "...You keep it. I do know how to pick 'em," she said with a confidence that she thought had been taken by the Gravemind.

"Lucky me."

For a fraction a of second, Cortana considered pushing herself from her position and wrapping her arms around the Chief, not caring if she couldn't really do such a thing or not.

He had saved her. And a hero deserved a reward for his noble deed.

Even if it was a phantom embrace from an AI who had inexplicably felt something -something impossible- towards him.

But, before she could act impulsively, he steered the conversation away from her rescue and turned their attention to the matter at hand.

She transferred herself out of High Charity's systems and into the chip that John had carried with him since he had left her. As she interfaced with his armor, she allowed herself the comfort of being linked with John again.

It almost satisfied her growing desire to be able to finally be able to experience the sensation of touch.

Almost, but not quite.

6. "To Boldly Go Where No AI Has gone Before"
>(Takes place during the "Midnight" end cutscene)<p>

It seemed fitting that her last act -saving John's life- would be rewarded with a precious gift: the sense of touch.

Cortana's saturated matrix couldn't explain the science of how she was able to convert her holographic avatar to hard light and how that allowed her to feel the sensation of touch, but she refused to overanalyze it. Not when she had so little time left.

All she had done since the day of her activation was think; now it was time to feel.

The first step towards John was both the easiest and the hardest thing she had done. She knew she would be saying goodbye to her

friend, her purpose for clinging to her existence during those long years on the _Dawn_, but at least she could fulfill a long-standing wish before her demise.

Words were exchanged between them, but the majority of her thought processes were preoccupied with the anticipation of finally being able to touch the man in front of her.

Would he flinch? Would he pull away? Or would he lean into her touch?

She lifted up her hand to his chest and placed her hand on his armor. His shields were down -had he turned them off when he realized what she was intending to do?- and for two precious seconds, she relished in the sensation of finally being able to feel John.

Her matrix was flooded with information -all new and wonderful- about his armor, but she ignored all of the data, closed her eyes and just let herself feel.

"I've waited so long to do that," she quietly confessed.

All of the thoughts of rampancy were chased away by warmth that spread throughout her. She relished in the...love that she felt towards John. And it was because of that impossibly complex, impossibly wonderful feeling, that she had the strength to do what she needed to do.

It was time to let him to return to his home and continue his legacy.

Without her.

She stepped back reluctantly as John pleaded with her to stay. But she couldn't. Not now.

"Welcome home, John."

End
file.